AUTOMATIC FOR THE PEOPLE
R.E.M.

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FIND THE RIVER

THE STROBE LIGHT FLASHES IN SLO-MO

revealing the singer being rolled and tossed over a sea of hands. Filmed in stark black and white, it's an equally mesmerising and disturbing scene. Is Michael Stipe being worshipped or torn apart by the mass of fans he's crowd-surfing over? The answer is: both.

As a visual metaphor, the video for "Drive," the first single from R.E.M.'s eighth studio album *Automatic For The People* was an arresting introduction to their most mysterious of records, and an ambiguous comment on the nature of the mainstream fame they'd recently found. It was October 1992, and in the wake of the multi-platinum success of *Out Of Time* the previous year, R.E.M.'s decision not to tour that record had given them limited exposure to their vastly expanded fan base. As a result, the "Drive" video was almost an eerie projection of the attention now surrounding them.

Not that, on a day-to-day basis, the band's heightened status really affected the members of R.E.M. themselves. "Out Of Time *came out and it sold 10 million copies or something,*" remembers Peter Buck. "*But, y'know, it just kinda felt like a rumour. Nothing really changed. None of us bought big houses or big cars or anything. We just went back into rehearsing and recording.*"

Surprised by the success of the decidedly non-rocky *Out Of Time*, and with no plan to tour its successor, R.E.M. now chose to push further into unexplored sonic territory. "Out of Time *may have freed us up somewhat to abandon our traditional guitar, bass, drums format,*" says Bill Berry. "*But not as much as knowing that we wouldn't have to attempt to convey the material live in a tour setting. We were free to take it in any direction we wanted.*"

"*We were exploring ways of not being the rock band that we'd been all through the '80s,*" says Buck. "*Preparing to go on tour always reintegrated the idea that, yeah, we're a rock and roll band and this what we do. This was more about sitting around and playing acoustic.*"

"*Peter had just gotten tired of playing guitar and was playing with different instruments,*" Michael Stipe recalls. "*Really my job was simply to try to build from the musical base they'd given me. The genesis of that big shift towards a more kind of non-rock music really began with those guys.*"

Preliminary writing and recording sessions for *Automatic For The People* began in the fall of 1991 at two familiar locations in Athens, Georgia – R.E.M.'s rehearsal room headquarters on Clayton Street, and their long-time engineer friend John Keane's studio only a distance of a few blocks from the band members' houses.

A certain playfulness characterised these early days of musical experimentation. Instruments were swapped, taking the band members out of their comfort zones and leading to unexpected moments of inspiration and even happy accidents. The song that was to become "Man On The Moon" took its verse shape when Berry, playing acoustic guitar, reached over to grab his beer and his hand slid up from a C chord to a D, prompting Buck to run in and urge him to keep playing it. Similarly, "Everybody Hurts" originated from a Berry acoustic guitar idea initially augmented and developed by Buck on drums and Mike Mills on organ. After chuckling their way through a spontaneous recording in this formation, as Berry remembers, "*the playback was not as rewarding as we'd hoped,*" and they switched back to their more traditional roles.

This sense of creative adventure continued for some months in Athens before the project moved in March 1992 to New Orleans, where R.E.M. took up residence at the French Quarter mansion that housed Daniel Lanois' Kingsway Studios, only three streets away from the Mississippi River.

The atmosphere of the city soon began to seep into the music. Stipe would accompany his friend Brad Pitt (in New Orleans filming "An Interview With A Vampire") on nocturnal bike-riding escapades. Buck remembers that Lanois' studio was "*like a Cajun swamp indoors*". The band found themselves recording in the wee small hours while surrounded by bizarre furnishings including a tree trunk and stuffed alligator.

"*We loved the informality of working in a big, grand living room full of weird New Orleans stuff,*" says Mike Mills. "*The house was supposed to be haunted. All of that added to the atmospheric quality of what we were trying to do. We knew that this was a vibey, kind of morbid record. So what better place to record it than New Orleans? A city very comfortable with death.*"

Lyrically, during the writing of *Automatic For The People*, the subject of mortality was very much on Michael Stipe's mind. "*By the time we got to New Orleans, I had already latched onto that theme,*" he explains. "*It was just something I was thinking about a lot. I'm sure that the advent of AIDS in the 1980s played into it. Staying with*

friends in New York, there was the immense sadness and horror of this epidemic run amok."

Yet these were songs that, although concerned with death, were also uplifting in spirit. The central character in "Try Not To Breathe" is willing herself into the grave, but has "lived a full life" and wants her nearest and dearest to remember her with love. "Sweetness Follows" is filled with grief but also strikes a note of epiphany in the realisation that togetherness amongst the living – particularly those distanced from one another and "lost in our little lives" – is the key.

"*Mortality is a theme that writers have chosen to work with throughout time,*" Stipe points out. "*It speaks of the fragility and beauty of life and living life to the fullest in the present moment. It happens all too quickly and we know that.*"

Nostalgia was the other theme running through the songs on *Automatic For The People*, from the scenes of youthful abandon depicted in "Nightswimming" to the echoes of the 1970s radio hits that fired the singer's imagination during the writing process. "Drive" shared its DNA with the spooked retro-future atmosphere of David Essex's "Rock On." "Everybody Hurts" – originally conceived as a duet for Stipe and Patti Smith (although the latter was at the time taking a sabbatical from the music industry) – was initially inspired by Stipe's memory of Nazareth's impassioned 1974 take on Boudleaux Bryant's "Love Hurts."

Elsewhere, "The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite" quoted the falsetto melody of The Tokens' "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" in its opening bars, before taking the listener somewhere else entirely, not least into the tangle of its lyrically obfuscated chorus. "*That was deliberate,*" says Mills. "Michael said, '*I don't want anybody to be able to figure out what this is.*'" The song was also unique in the sense that it was the first and only time the bassist ever asked the singer to elucidate its meaning. "*It gave only a partial clearing,*" Mills laughs. "*He said, 'One thing it's about is man versus machine.' I said, 'That's good enough for me.'*"

Another key track, the bouzouki-driven, East European-flavored "Monty Got A Raw Deal," obliquely tackled the life of film star Montgomery Clift and his dramatic fall from the silver screen. Later, Stipe met Clift's close friend and co-star Elizabeth Taylor. "*I spoke to her about that song,*" he remembers, "*and told her that she's mentioned in the second verse. She told me about her and Montgomery Clift and how they shared the deepest and most profound type of love, but that it was an unspeakable love. It went, I think, beyond sexual desire and the kind of straight narrative that people insisted on placing on love at that time.*"
Work on *Automatic For The People* progressed through a variety of locations and recording studios – Bearsville in upstate New York, Criteria in Miami (where Mills added piano to "Nightswimming" on the same instrument used for the long coda of Derek And The Dominos' "Layla") and Bosstown in Atlanta (where John Paul Jones's inventive string arrangements were committed to tape). All through the process, however, one song remained frustratingly unfinished.

When the sessions reached Bad Animals Studios in Seattle in the summer of '92, the backing track for "Man On The Moon" was mixed and ready to go. Stipe however was suffering from writer's block when it came to completing its lyric. "*We're like, 'Michael, you've gotta finish it,'*" remembers Mills.

Producer Scott Litt, sensing the rising tensions, offered a solution. "*Normally we'd have gone into the studio and beat our heads against the wall for, like, five days,*" says Buck. "*Scott just said, 'Hey, why don't we take the week off? Michael, you can do whatever you wanna do for a week and finish this song.'*"

The catalyst proved to be a VHS tape of Andy Kaufman's comedy performances that had been brought to the studio by the band's friend, Mark Williams (the onetime Atlanta DJ-turned-music executive who'd first tipped off I.R.S. Records about R.E.M. in their early days). One night, Stipe picked up his Walkman and played a cassette of the instrumental track as he strolled around Seattle, writing en route the brilliant picture puzzle lyric of "Man On The Moon," which mixed scientific and Biblical references with board games, Mott The Hoople, conspiracy theory and even an Elvis impersonation. It was to become a cryptic, time-and-space-bending missive to the great beyond and one of R.E.M.'s finest songs. At the same time, it was in Stipe's mind the result of an imagined songwriting throwdown by Kurt Cobain.

"*Kurt had written all these songs with the word 'yeah' in them,*" Stipe explains. "*I was determined to challenge myself to write a song that had more 'yeah's than anything that Kurt had written.*"

But the star of the show, of course, was the mindwarping Kaufman, at the time a largely forgotten figure. "*Magically, Andy Kaufman arrived as the narrative link,*" the singer recalls. "*He arrived as our everyman, as our hero with a thousand faces.*"

Back in Miami during the latter tracking stages of *Automatic For The People*, the band invited photographer Anton Corbijn to join them in the city to shoot images for the album's artwork. One day Corbijn and Stipe were walking past The Sinbad Motel on Biscayne Boulevard, close to Criteria Studios, when the singer spotted the odd, pointed star sculpture on the motel's roof.

"*I said to Anton, 'Please shoot that, I think it's beautiful,'*" he recalls. "*He blew off a couple of rolls of film with the band in front of it. We pulled the image from the back of one of those photographs, and that became the cover.*"

After pinning the image up on a wall in the studio, for a time the working title of the album became *Star*.

"*I liked that title,*" says Stipe. "*I wish we'd used it. It would've made more sense with the artwork.*"

"*But as with the word 'dream',*" Mills argues, "*there are a lot of different ways to look at 'star'. But most of the ways to look at 'star' were not going to suit us well. However tongue-in-cheek we might have meant it, it might not have been perceived that way.*"

Instead, as regular customers of Weaver D's Delicious Fine Foods soul food restaurant in Athens, Georgia, the band were drawn to the establishment's outfront sign slogan, "Automatic for the people." After seeking the proprietor's permission to use it, the album's title was decided.

A quarter of a century on, R.E.M. are very rightly proud of what they achieved with *Automatic For The People*, both creatively and commercially, given that it has gone on to sell over 18 million copies worldwide.

"*It's often mentioned as our best record and I wouldn't argue that,*" says Berry.

"*I think it's our most cohesive record,*" Mills decides. "*It's the strongest from first to last.*"

"*When I think of* Automatic For The People," says Buck, "I have a picture in my head of some weird kinda grey-ish green landscape. It gives you a feeling all the way through. It sustains a mood."

"*When you're in a project, you're just in it,*" Stipe concludes. "*You're trying to make it as good as it can be. But, particularly live, "Man On The Moon" became the kind of song that brought an entire field full of people together, singing and throwing their arms in the air and celebrating life.*"

And so, in the end, from an album about mortality came the joy of life. *Automatic For The People* is also that rarest of things: a record that hasn't aged. Upon its release, it provided the soundtrack of the time, and it resonates just as powerfully and beautifully today.

-Tom Doyle

August, 2017

CREDITS

AUTOMATIC FOR THE PEOPLE

Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, Michael Stipe
[and}
Bertis Downs, Jefferson Holt

Produced by Scott Litt & R.E.M.
Mixed by Scott Litt & Clif Norrell

Recorded
Bearsville Studio, Bearsville, New York
Second Engineer: George Cowan
Criteria Recording Studios, Miami, Florida
Second Engineer: Andrew Roshberg

Additional Recording
John Keane Studio, Athens, Georgia
Engineer: John Keane
Kingsway Studio, New Orleans, Louisiana
Second Engineer: Mark Howard
Bosstown Recording Studios, Atlanta, Georgia
Second Engineer: Ted Malia

Mixed
Bad Animals/Seattle, Seattle, Washington
Second Engineer: Ted Brooks
Assistant Engineer: Tod Lemkuhl

Technical Assistance by Mark Mytrowitz [Microwave]
Drum Technician: Robert Hall

Orchestral Arrangements by John Paul Jones
[Drive, Everybody Hurts, The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite & Nightswimming]

Session Players
Violins: Lonnie Ottzen, Denise Berginson-Smith, Jody Taylor,
Sou-Chun Su, Sandy Salzinger, Patti Gouvas
Violas: Paul Murphy (leader), Reid Harris, Heidi Nitchie
Cellos: Elizabeth Proctor Murphy, Kathleen Kee, Daniel Laufer
Oboe: Deborah Workman
Conductor: George Hanson

Additional Musicians
Cello: Knox Chandler [Monty Got A Raw Deal & Sweetness Follows]
Harmonica & Clavinet: Scott Litt [Ignoreland]

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Automatic For The People is the motto and service mark of Weaver D's
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All songs by Berry, Buck, Mills, Stipe
Published by Night Garden Music. Administered in this world, among others,
by Universal Music Publishing Group (BMI)

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